

# The blue goose—mythical creature or enduring symbol?

by Scott Slavik

Do you know what bird can be seen at every one of the 500 plus National Wildlife Refuges in the United States? The answer is the Blue Goose. The Blue Goose is not some ubiquitous waterfowl with indigo plumage, but rather the official symbol of the National Wildlife Refuge System. In the six years that I have worked at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge I've seen the Blue Goose on a daily basis. I've worn Blue Goose pins and temporary tattoos and had my picture taken with a "live" six-foot tall Blue Goose at last year's Refuge System centennial celebration in Ninilchik. But why a Blue Goose? I'd never given it much thought until now, that is. On a whim, I did some research and here's what I found out.

An editorial cartoonist named Jay Norwood "Ding" Darling (1876-1962) designed the emblem of a stylized Canada goose, blue in color on a white background, over 65 years ago. Darling was born in Norwood, Michigan and his editorial cartoons appeared in approximately 150 major daily newspapers throughout the United States. It has been estimated that in the period 1900 to 1949 he drew 15,000 cartoons chronicling the history, trends, thoughts, and politics of the United States. He signed his cartoons with the nickname "Ding," which he derived by combining the first letter of his last name Darling with the last three letters. In an era before television and the internet, where newspapers were the primary source of information, Darling's cartoons had a substantial impact on public opinion. His accomplishments as a political cartoonist won him two Pulitzer Prizes. An avid hunter and fisherman, he was passionate about politics and conservation and often worked themes involving pollution and extinction of wildlife into his cartoons.

In 1934 President Franklin D. Roosevelt appointed Ding Darling as the head of the U.S. Biological Survey, the predecessor of the Fish & Wildlife Service, and Darling soon came to be known as the leading conservationist and ecologist of his generation. He worked to increase national attention and expenditures for conservation as well as developing programs and institutions that would benefit wildlife. It was during this time that he created the flying Blue Goose symbol for federal wildlife refuges. The Blue Goose has marked

refuge boundaries, entrance signs, brochures, and exhibits ever since.

In addition to establishing the National Wildlife Federation and the Migratory Bird Conservation Commission, Ding Darling helped pass the Wildlife Restoration Act, which provides money to states for the purchase of game habitat through a tax on sporting firearms and ammunition. Darling also created the Federal Duck Stamp Program and designed the nation's first "Duck Stamp." Duck Stamps are the federal license required for hunting migratory waterfowl, and today more than 1.5 million stamps are sold each year. Proceeds from the sale of Duck Stamps are used to purchase wetlands for the protection of waterfowl habitat. It is considered by some to be the most successful conservation program ever initiated. Darling has been referred to as the best friend ducks ever had.

Ding Darling's achievements in conservation were immortalized in the dedication of the J. N. Ding Darling National Wildlife Refuge on Sanibel Island, Florida. When you visit any national wildlife refuge in the country, you still see Ding Darling's legacy—the Blue Goose. The Blue Goose may not be a rare bird, but it has indeed become a respected one. It continues to symbolize the National Wildlife Refuge System, the only network of public lands dedicated specifically to wildlife conservation. Rachel Carson, author of "Silent Spring" wrote, "whenever you meet this sign, respect it. It means that the land behind the sign has been dedicated by the American people to preserving, for themselves and their children, as much of our native wildlife as can be retained along with modern civilization."

It was nothing more than good old fashion curiosity that started my research into the history of the Refuge System's Blue Goose logo. I wasn't sure what the outcome would be, but I ended up discovering a unique man with an interesting history who became a prominent figure in the early conservation movement in the United States. The most important thing I learned during the writing of this article is that often the simple and familiar things that surround us, upon deeper investigation, can reveal an untold story of great relevance. I think this same lesson can be

applied to the natural treasures of the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge, which we can all sometimes take for granted. Perhaps the only thing better than maintaining a sense of wonder and curiosity of the world around us is to actually stop and take the time to learn

more about it.

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